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ABSTRACT

Three studies carried out in 1975 with the assistance of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting examined use of public television by black viewers. Results from statewide telephone surveys in Mississippi and North Carolina indicated that significantly fewer blacks than whites watched public television. However, most of the differences disappeared when education was held constant. A similar survey in predominantly black areas of Columbus, Ohio, found that viewing was heavier among blacks than among whites. The saturation of black households by television was considered a possible explanation for the high level of use of public television among blacks in that study. In all three studies, black viewers reported a higher level of viewing of black-oriented programs than did whites. (Author/AA)

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Use of Public Television by Blacks in Mississippi, North Carolina and Columbus, Ohio

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Introduction

Public television, already accused of liberal bias and elitism, was given another jolt in 1975 when Federal Communications Commissioner Benjamin C. Hooks, the only black member of the FCC, charged that WNET, the public TV station in New York serving about one fourth of the total television audience, had "concentrated its effort on one minority group, the cultured white cosmopolite and too often neglected the enlightenment of other less fortunate minorities which it has a fundamental duty to serve."[1]

Hooks' charge, which the New York Times' television critic John J. O'Conner called "a cascade of claptrap and contradition,"[2] was made in his dissent to a 6-1 FCC ruling rejecting a petition to deny WNET a renewal of its broadcasting license. The petition had been submitted by the Puerto Rican Media Action and Educational Council which claimed that the station had failed to provide adequate programing for the Spanish-speaking residents of New York. The commission rejected the argument except for Hooks whose angry one-man minority opinion charged that "public television, without the legal or moral right to do so, has become the Caucasian intellectual's home entertainment game." "From its perpetually low ratings," Hooks chided, "it is evident that WNET's British drama, German music, French cuisine and Russian ballet are of interest to a minimal portion of the television audience."

Several of the points raised in the WNET controversy were not new. Under most circumstances, public television cannot compete with the commercial networks for a mass audience, and most agree that it probably should not try. From its beginning as unsung and unwatched educational television, public TV has been defined as an alternative to commercial stations, not a competitor. And as an alternative, most observers agree that public television is interested in minority audiences.[3] Here the term includes more than racial or ethnic minorities; it means any numerically small group of viewers whose special program interests are not adequately served by the mass-appeal commercial networks. In a thoughtful and influential essay, Lloyd Morrisett, president of the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, argued this point:[4]

> If public broadcasting must be justified on the basis of serving an audience yet can't compete with commercial television for a share of the mass audience, public television must then attract its primary audience by presenting material aimed at subgroups of the population that share special interests. In fact, this direction for public television has already been proclaimed, even though the record of success is mediocre. Aside from a very few programs such as "Sesame Street," there has been little attempt to define special audiences, discover material that satisfies specific interests, and present that material in highly attractive formats. The relatively few shows aimed at special interests -- such as painting or gardening -- were produced without any thorough audience assessment and usually on low budgets. Where relative success has come -- as with Julia Child's "French Chef" -- it is a tribute to the flair of the performer.

Morrisett's broad definition of "minorities" whose interests public television ought to serve, of course, includes those represented by the Minorities and Communication Division. And among those minority audiences, the one which stands out most clearly on the public television program schedule is blacks. Whatever minority audiences public television should be concerned with, clearly the black audience is among them. And blacks are the one group whose special interest programing appears most often on public television channels. Whether the attention given to black interests is adequate is obviously an important question but one outside the scope of this paper. The point here is that most public stations do provide at least some programing aimed largely at blacks.

Morrisett's essay also raises the problem of public television's audience size. Except for a few programs this season, public television has not been able to reach more than a small proportion of the total TV audience. Specific program ratings of 1-3% of the total TV audience are normal; serious competition to commercial stations -- such as the National Geographic special on the human body -- are rare. And some evidence suggests that viewing by blacks is even lower than among whites. If Hooks' characterization of the public television viewer as the "cultured, white cosmopolite" is unfair -- and it is when one considers that half of the public TV adult audience has only a high school or grade

school education -- then it must be acknowledged that public television, nevertheless, has not demonstrated its ability to reach significant numbers of the black community.

This paper focuses on two questions pertinent to the issue of public television and its black audience: Do blacks watch public television less than whites? And do programs on public television aimed at black viewers attract their intended audience?

Background

The size of the public television audience depends to some degree on the definition of a viewer. Bower's[5] nationwide survey in 1970 found that one-third (33%) of the respondents in his survey watched public TV at some time and one-fifth (20%) were weekly viewers. The figures are somewhat misleading, however, because the potential public television audience is smaller than the total population. Some areas of the country still have no public TV signal available, and the medium's heavy use of the UHF channels -- 25% of homes had access to public television only on a UHF channel, according to a 1974 study by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting[6] -- reduce the potential audience to 50-80%[7] of the total population. In Bower's study, among people who knew they could receive public television, 68% watched at some time and 40% were weekly viewers.

Clearly the public television audience has increased since that study was done. A CPB analysis of Nielsen data in 1975[8] indicated that over a four-week period, almost half (49%) of all households in the country tuned in to public TV and 30% of all TV households watched at least once a week. A Roper study[9] in November, 1975, defined 43% of a national sample of 2007 adults as public television viewers. This definition was derived from two aided recall questions of public and commercial TV programs and the number of shows seen on public or commercial television during the past four weeks.

So in the country as a whole, about half -- perhaps a little under -- of the households tune in public television at least occasionally, but if households where no public TV signal is available are excluded, the figure increases considerably. The weekly audience is about one household in three in the country -- perhaps somewhat more. The audiences for specific programs, however, are small and seldom compete seriously with commercial competitors. At most times during the prime time evening hours, 1-3% of all sets are tuned to a public channel; a program which draws more than 5% of the total TV households is rare.

The most recent of these studies -- the 1975 Roper Report -- indicates a lower use of public television among blacks than

whites. In that study, 45% of the white respondents were classified as public TV viewers, but only 32% of the blacks were in that category.[10]

Bower does not report breakdowns of public television viewers by race, but Lyle's 1974 monograph summarizes several studies, some sponsored by CPB, others undertaken by different sponsors. CPB studies found no differences in public TV viewing between blacks and whites in Boston, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Denver, Los Angeles or Nashville. Smaller proportions of black viewers than whites were found in surveys in New York and Washington.

However, Lyle points out that an "overwhelming number" of minority viewers were tuned to daytime children's programs, not to the evening schedule where the adult black-oriented programs were available. This caveat relates to the question of the ability of public television to attract black viewers to special minority-oriented programs.

Data pertinent to this question are difficult to glean from commercial ratings because of the small numbers involved. A series of Nielsen reports based on subsamples of black households in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and Washington showed that, with a few exceptions, the audiences for public television programs were too small for analysis. The only specifically black program in any of the five markets that

drew a measurable audience among blacks was Detroit Black Journal. A report based on interviews with blacks in 20 major markets in 1973, using aided recall questions, indicated that 15% of the respondents said they regularly watched Black Journal; 39% said they watched another regular PBS series, Soul, although there was some evidence of confusion of that program with Soul Train, then shown on commercial TV. Among respondents with pre-school children, 45% said that their children regularly watched Sesame Street.[11]

These surveys present less than a consistent picture of the black audience for public television. Nationally, the proportion of blacks who watch public television seems to be lower than that of whites. Some of the differences might be the result of educational differences or differences in the availability of an adequate public TV picture. In metropolitan areas, the picture is more confused: studies in several cities found no differences, but in at least two major markets -- New York and Washington -- a smaller proportion of blacks than whites watched.

One of public television's success stories has been its children's programs, and it is here, if anywhere, that the medium has been most successful in reaching the black audience. For the evening adult programs aimed at blacks, the data are sketchy but provide little to support the contention that

black-oriented public television programs are more than marginally successful in reaching the black audience.

Method

New data applicable to the questions raised here are available in three studies carried out in 1975 by public television stations and networks in Mississippi, North Carolina and Columbus, Ohio. All were part of a project sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting testing the use of volunteers -- members of organizations usually known as Friends of Public Television -- in audience research. In these three studies, local volunteers did the interviewing and sometimes helped with other aspects of the surveys as well. CPB provided a consultant to give technical assistance to the stations in designing the survey, executing the fieldwork and analyzing and interpreting the data. While the surveys generally followed procedures and definitions of similar studies sponsored by CPB, responsibility for the design of the three surveys and interpretation of the results rests with the consultant.[12]

Details of the three studies are as follows:

In Mississippi, a statewide telephone survey of the awareness and use of public television was carried out in July, 1975, sponsored by the Mississippi Authority for Educational

Television in Jackson. Telephone numbers were selected from published directories in proportion to the population of each county. Interviewing was done from the offices of the ETV Authority on a statewide long-distance telephone system. The sampling procedures were designed by a faculty member at a local university, and the sample was drawn by a student hired for the purpose. Interviewing was done from the offices of the ETV Authority by members of Mississippians for ETV. Several people on the staff of the ETV Authority coded the results.

A similar statewide survey of the awareness and use of public television was undertaken in North Carolina in October, 1975. The sample was drawn by undergraduate research clerks at the University of North Carolina School of Journalism assisted by a member of the local volunteer group, Friends of University Network Television (FOUNT). The statewide sample was a form of random digit dialing. An ordinary interval sample was drawn from telephone books in the state. In this case, every 300th name was taken from about 40 directories in use in North Carolina. The last three digits were then replaced by random numbers. This permits interviewers to reach unlisted numbers and new installations but is more efficient than dialing totally random numbers.[13]

Interviewing was done from the administrative offices of

the UNC-TV network (the statewide public television network) by volunteers and students enrolled in an introductory journalism research methods course. Students coded the completed questionnaires.

The third survey was similar in content but different in the population sampled. In October, 1975, a telephone survey was carried out in the areas of Columbus, Ohio, with a concentration of black residents. Telephone numbers were drawn systematically from street telephone directories in census tracts classified as 50% or more black. The purpose of the survey was to measure awareness and use of public television among blacks in Columbus. Interviewing was done by volunteers and some members of the WOSU-TV staff. Staff personnel also completed the coding of responses.

All three studies used similar questionnaires which were patterned after, but not exactly like, those developed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for use in other audience surveys. Two sequences of questions are of interest here. The first was a series of questions designed to measure awareness and use of public television. "Do you know if there is a non-commercial educational or public television station in your area? Does anyone in your family ever watch educational television? Do you yourself ever watch? Have you watched within the past week?" From responses to these questions,

respondents were categorized as Unaware of PTV, Non-viewers of PTV (that is, they knew about it but never watched), Occasional Viewers (respondents who watched at sometime but not last week), and Weekly Viewers (individuals who said they watched during the previous week).

Respondents who said they watched public television at least occasionally were then asked about a series of specific programs. "Here are some programs that have been on educational television. Do you remember watching...?" The list of programs varied from survey to survey.

Results

Results of the Mississippi survey are shown in Table 1. On the whole, awareness of public television and use of it were lower than figures cited above for the nation as a whole. Some of the difference could be attributed to the generally low educational levels in the state and to extensive use of UHF channels in the state ETV network. The finding is consistent with the 1975 Roper study which found that viewing of public television was lower in the south as a whole than in any other part of the country.

Differences between blacks and whites are dramatic. About three whites in ten (29%) claimed not to know about ETV; about one in three (32%) was familiar with the service but never

watched; and the remainder (38%) watched at least occasionally. Among the blacks in the survey, in contrast, more than half (58%) did not know about the Mississippi ETV network, and only slightly more than one in four (27%) ever watched. Sixteen per cent said they knew about it but did not watch.

In North Carolina (Table 2), results are consistent with those in the Mississippi survey. Viewing figures were about the same: 36% of whites watched, 22% of blacks viewed at least occasionally. But there were some differences between the two states in proportions of respondents who did not know about public TV or who knew about it but never watched (awareness and non-viewing were both higher in Mississippi than North Carolina), but the relationships between blacks and whites were remarkably similar. In both studies, the proportion of white viewers of public television was about half again as large as the proportion of black viewers.

The third study in Columbus differed in its focus on the core of a northern urban area. Blacks in relatively well integrated areas (i.e., census tracts of less than 50% blacks) were excluded, and the whites in the sample were limited to those living as minorities in heavily black downtown areas.

The results of the Columbus survey (Table 3) are surprising. The biggest surprise is the level of viewing of public television

among the entire sample, but particularly among blacks. This is the highest figure reported in any of the CPB-assisted surveys and probably the highest obtained in any survey. Since volunteer interviewers did the work on the survey, there is the possibility of error in overzealous but inexperienced (and largely unsupervised) interviewing. But this really does not seem reasonable as similar limitations were operative in the two statewide surveys as well. The results are internally consistent so there is no basis for assuming that there was some consistent interviewer bias. With no reasonable alternative explanation of the results available, one can accept the findings as accurate.

The second surprising finding is that use of public television was higher among blacks than among whites, a result different from that of almost all other studies. A possible explanation of this, however, is in the characteristics of the two groups. Blacks in this sample -- typical of those in inner city areas -- were heavy television users, frequently had large families and were generally surrounded by a television-saturated environment. The whites, in contrast, were for the most part older people and usually without children. Their use of television was lower also. In interviews collected only in an inner city area, the black respondents tend to be the kind of people one would expect to be public television viewers and whites, on the other hand, are typically people one would

not expect to find in the public television audience.

As noted earlier and shown consistently in studies of the public television audience, education is likely to confound the relationship between viewing and race. Education is consistently the strongest predictor of public television viewing and could account for the lower level of viewing by blacks since the educational level of blacks, on the whole, is lower than that of whites. To test this proposition, education was entered in the analysis as a control variable. These results are shown in Tables 4, 5 and 6. In the two statewide surveys, most -- but not all -- of the difference between blacks and whites disappears. At the college level, the statistical significance of the difference disappears, and at the intermediate high school level it disappears in the North Carolina survey and drops from the .01 level to the .05 level in Mississippi. In Columbus, the pattern of no significant differences between blacks and whites is maintained.

The second question with which this paper is concerned is whether blacks are in fact viewers of black-oriented programs. For this analysis, we include only those respondents -- black and white -- who are in the public television audience. This, of course, reduces the numbers of respondents to dangerously low levels in some cases and could lead to a misinterpretation of the results if one forgets that the black

samples in the North Carolina and Mississippi surveys contain a substantially smaller proportion of the total black sample than is the case among the white viewer sample.

The proportions of black and white public television viewers who claim to have seen -- ever -- specific programs are shown in Tables 7, 8 and 9. The results are quite remarkable in their consistency. In each case in all three studies, the proportion of black viewers who reported seeing the black-oriented programs was significantly higher than the proportion of white viewers who reported seeing the same program. This includes Sesame Street as a black-oriented program, a reasonable classification given the objectives of that series. In contrast, although there are some substantial percentage differences between blacks and whites in other programs -- in some cases, blacks reported higher viewing; in others, higher viewing by whites was indicated -- in no case does the difference reach the customary level of significance of less than one chance in 20 that the difference could be the result of random error.

Discussion

Previous research has shown consistently a pattern of lower use of public television by blacks than whites in studies based on national samples. In studies limited to metropolitan areas, results have been less clearcut: sometimes differences

were found; in other surveys, no differences were noted. These three studies seem to support that same pattern: in North Carolina and Mississippi statewide surveys, strong differences between races were found, but in the survey in the inner core of Columbus, no significant differences were found.

One explanation of the differences in the two statewide surveys was the different levels of education between large populations of blacks and whites, and indeed, when education was introduced as a control variable, most of the racial difference disappeared. In a separate analysis of variance of the two surveys not reported here, race accounted for about 10% of the variance of public TV use, but when education was entered first as a covariate, the proportion of variance accounted for by race dropped to 1%. This can be interpreted as showing that race by itself accounts for very little of the difference between black and white public TV use; education, as other studies have also shown, is a much more powerful factor in public TV use. In the two studies here, race by itself accounts for only about 1% of the variance in public TV viewing; education, in contrast, accounts for about 9%.

But if education rather than race seems to be a decisive factor in public TV viewing in large populations, we are still left with the finding in Columbus -- and similar results in earlier studies -- that the difference between blacks and

whites tends to disappear in urban areas.

A special factor may be operating in such cases that is obscured when a sample is drawn from an entire state or the nation. This is the dominance of television in the urban inner city. A number of studies -- particularly those by Greenberg and Dervin[14] -- have documented the saturation of television in the urban core, and the study in Columbus was consistent with earlier studies. Among blacks, for example, 34% said they owned two television sets; 46% said they had three or more. In the same group, 33% said the set was on 5 to 8 hours a day; 41% said the set was in use 9 hours a day or more.

A nationwide Nielsen survey in late 1975 was consistent with these figures. Nationally blacks on the average watched 6 hours a 15 minutes of television a day -- more than an hour more than whites.[15] Given a higher use of television by blacks in general and the saturation of television in the inner city, it is not surprising that the level of viewing of public TV among blacks approaches that of the white audience even though educational differences remain. With several sets operating almost all day -- the typical situation among Columbus respondents -- the black household would be likely to come across the public channel almost by chance.

The Nielsen study also found that blacks tended to prefer commercial entertainment programs that starred or at least featured a minority personality. The five most popular programs among blacks were Good Times, Sanford and Son, That's My Mama, Get Christie Love and Chico and the Man, all of which had minorities in leading roles. Only two of those -- Sanford and Son and Chico and the Man -- were among the five most frequently seen programs of whites.

Given a preference for minority programs on the commercial networks by blacks, it is not surprising that similar patterns emerge from a study of the black viewers of public television. But it is gratifying -- if not surprising -- that the programs oriented especially to a black audience do in fact attract black viewers in significantly larger numbers than white viewers. But a caution is in order as well which is something like the problem of deciding whether a half glass of water is half full or half empty. While it is true that these three studies show a significantly higher proportion of black viewers who watch the black-oriented programs, the base of black viewers is substantially smaller proportionately than the base of white viewers. Once blacks become part of the public TV audience, they tend to watch the programs aimed especially at them; getting them to watch the public channel at all is the problem.

Summary and Conclusions

Public television has acknowledged the black audience as one of the specialized minority audiences which it has a responsibility to serve. Whether that service is adequate is still under debate, and the strong views of people like FCC Commissioner Hooks indicate that the debate is likely to continue. But while the debate goes on, it is useful to examine the use of public television by blacks, especially their viewing of programs oriented specially to them.

Results of previous studies suggest that blacks are less often viewers of public television than whites. This is true at the national level and in some studies limited to metropolitan areas. Little information on viewing of black-oriented programs is available.

Three studies carried out in 1975 with assistance from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting bear on these questions. Statewide telephone surveys on the use of public television were undertaken in North Carolina and Mississippi; a similar study limited to predominantly black areas of Columbus, Ohio, was also completed as part of the same project.

In the two statewide surveys, significantly fewer blacks than whites watched public television. However, most of the

differences disappeared when education was held constant. This finding was interpreted as meaning that education rather than race was the significant factor in the public television audience.

In Columbus, viewing was higher among blacks than whites although this could be explained by the differences in the types of people found in the inner city. The saturation of television in black households was considered a possible explanation for the high level of use of public television among blacks in that study.

In all three studies, black viewers consistently reported a higher level of viewing of black-oriented programs than whites. And while this could be considered strong evidence of public television's success in reaching the black audience, it was pointed out that among large populations, fewer blacks than whites watched any public television. The problem seems to be to encourage blacks to tune in to a public TV station rather than to get those who already watch to tune in the programs targeted to them.

Notes

1. Puerto Rican Media Action and Educational Council, Inc., 32 Pike and Fischer RR II 1401 (1975).

2. New York Times, March 30, 1975.

3. E.g., Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, Public Television: A Program for Action. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

4. Lloyd N. Morrisett, "Rx for Public Television," in the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation Annual Report 1972-73, New York.

5. Robert T. Bower, Television and the Public. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

6. Jack Lyle, The People Look at Public Television 1974. Washington: Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

7. The 50% estimate is from Bower, the 80% from Lyle.

8. Lyle, op cit.

9. Reported in the weekly CPB Report, Vol. VII, No. 5, February 2, 1976.

10. These figures are estimated, recalculated from data in the CPB report.

11. Lyle, op cit.

12. Detailed reports of these studies are available from the author.

13. Mathew Hauck and Michael Cox, "Locating a Sample by Random Digit Dialing," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1974), pp. 253-260.

14. Bradley S. Greenberg and Brenda Dervin, Use of the Mass Media by the Urban Poor. New York: Praeger, 1970.

15. New York Times, September 30, 1975.

Table 1: Use of Public Television by Race in Mississippi

	White n=495	Black n=141
Unaware of PTV	29%	58%
Non-viewer of PTV	32	16
Occasional viewer	22	16
Weekly viewer	16	11
	p=.00*	

*Significance levels are based on chi square test.

Table 2: Use of Public Television by Race in North Carolina

	White n=514	Black n=95
Unaware of PTV	45%	65%
Non-viewer of PTV	19	13
Occasional viewer	23	14
Weekly viewer	13	8
	p=.00	

Table 3: Use of Public Television by Race in Columbus

	White n=125	Black n=175
Unaware of PTV	18%	9%
Non-viewer of PTV	15	11
Occasional viewer	43	42
Weekly viewer	25	38
	p=.02	

Table 4: Use of Public Television by Race by Education in Mississippi

	Grade School		High School		College	
	White n=56	Black n=60	White n=245	Black n=50	White n=182	Black n=29
Unaware of PTV	48%	77%	33%	54%	18%	31%
Non-viewer of PTV	36	8	31	16	31	28
Occasional viewer	11	10	20	18	29	24
Weekly viewer	5	5	16	12	22	17
	p=.00		p=.03		p=.40	

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Table 5: Use of Public Television by Race by Education in North Carolina

	Grade School		High School		College	
	White n=92	Black n=24	White n=227	Black n=49	White n=195	Black n=22
Unaware of PTV	79%	92%	48%	65%	26%	36%
Non-viewer of PTV	10	8	23	12	19	18
Occasional viewer	8	0	21	14	31	27
Weekly viewer	3	0	8	8	24	18
	p=.39		p=.12		p=.74	

Table 6: Use of Public Television by Race by Education in Columbus

	Grade School		High School		College	
	White n=14	Black n=9	White n=77	Black n=117	White n=33	Black n=43
Unaware of PTV	43%	56%	17%	9%	3%	0%
Non-viewer of PTV	21	22	16	13	12	7
Occasional viewer	21	11	44	41	52	56
Weekly viewer	14	11	23	38	33	37
	p=.90		p=.11		p=.58	

Table 7: Viewing of Public TV Programs by Race in Mississippi

PTV Viewers who saw:	White n=190	Black n=37	Significance of difference
Candidate '75	30%	32%	p=.87
Film Classics	56%	65%	p=.40
Nova	25%	41%	p=.09
Black Perspective*	21%	60%	p=.00
F-Y-I For Your Information	25%	41%	p=.08
Feeling Good	30%	46%	p=.08
Faces*	21%	46%	p=.00

*Minority-oriented program

Table 8: Viewing of Public TV Programs by Race in North Carolina

PTV Viewers who saw:	White n=184	Black n=21	Significance of difference
Masterpiece Theatre	54%	33%	p=.18
Monty Python	24%	19%	p=.82
Sesame Street*	64%	91%	p=.03
Consumer Survival Kit	34%	43%	p=.60
Black Perspective*	32%	57%	p=.04
Woman	26%	10%	p=.16

Table 9: Viewing of Public TV Programs by Race in Columbus

PTV viewers who saw:	White n=85	Black n=140	Significance of difference
Black Perspective*	39%	79%	p=.00
Masterpiece Theatre	72%	62%	p=.26
Afromation*	18%	53%	p=.00
Soundstage	45%	44%	p=.99
The Way It Was	35%	41%	p=.53
Washington Week in Review	42%	40%	p=.57
Say Brother*	17%	35%	p=.01